



Foreign Funded Islamist Extremism in the UK

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Executive Summary

- The foreign financing and promotion of Islamist extremism in Britain is a serious challenge that has now been recognised by the UK government. The government's 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy pledged to look at the role of overseas funding in driving domestic extremism. In January 2016 the Home Office's Extremism Analysis Unit was tasked with investigating this matter, although the government has not announced plans to publish this research.
- The foreign funding for Islamist extremism in Britain primarily comes from governments and government linked foundations based in the Gulf, as well as Iran. Foremost among these has been Saudi Arabia, which since the 1960s has sponsored a multimillion dollar effort to export Wahhabi Islam across the Islamic world, including to Muslim communities in the West.
- In the UK this funding has primarily taken the form of endowments to mosques and Islamic educational institutions, which have in turn played host to extremist preachers and the distribution of extremist literature. Influence has also been exerted through the training of British Muslim religious leaders in Saudi Arabia, as well as the use of Saudi textbooks in a number of the UK's independent Islamic schools.
- A number of Britain's most serious Islamist hate preachers sit within the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology and are linked to extremism sponsored from overseas, either by having studied in Saudi Arabia as part of scholarship programmes, or by having been provided with extreme literature and material within the UK itself. There have also been numerous cases of British individuals who have joined Jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria whose radicalisation is thought to link back to foreign funded institutions and preachers.
- Over the past decade or more, governments in several Western countries have either proposed measures to address the foreign funding of Islamist extremism, or have intervened directly to block foreign funding for certain religious institutions. One of the most far-reaching cases is in Austria, where in 2015 legislation prohibited the foreign funding of mosques and imams. In 2016 the French Prime Minister suggested that his country would also implement a temporary ban on the foreign funding of mosques. That year it was reported that investigations by German intelligence agencies had concluded that there had been a "long-running strategy to exert influence" by certain Gulf countries through the financing of schools, mosques and Salafi missionary groups.
- In June 2017 the UK government pledged to establish a commission for countering extremism. The challenge of foreign funded Islamist extremism is one area that could be prioritised by this new body. There is a clear lack of publicly available information on this subject and the Home Office has said that the research being carried out by the Extremism Analysis Unit may never be published. As such, an open and public inquiry into the funding of extremism from overseas would represent an important step toward formulating policy to address this problem. While Britain may not choose to introduce legislation for blocking foreign funding, measures might be considered that would oblige institutions to show more transparency on certain kinds funding from abroad.

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Introduction

Following the recent Islamist terror attacks in Manchester and London, and a wave of terrorism in continental Europe, the threat level in the UK remains at Severe, meaning further attacks are highly likely. As of 2015 the national counter-terrorism strategy has placed increased emphasis on addressing the role that non-violent Islamist extremism and extremist ideology plays in ultimately leading some individuals to commit acts of violence. In the Queen's Speech of June 2017, the government announced that as part of this effort it would establish a Commission for Countering Extremism¹. The phenomenon of so-called home-grown Islamist extremism clearly remains a major challenge for Britain, as indicated by an estimated 850 UK nationals having travelled to join Jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria, around half of which have now returned to Britain.² However, domestic extremism in the UK has in many instances been driven and influenced from abroad, particularly through funding for the promotion of Islamist ideology sent from overseas.

In recent years, there have been numerous cases of Islamic institutions in Britain that have been found to be promoting Islamist extremism while also receiving funding from outside the UK. Although the question of foreign funded extremism began to receive increased public attention over a decade ago, it had subsequently slipped from the political agenda. Nevertheless, the available evidence indicates that foreign funded and influenced Islamist extremism remains a serious problem in the UK, and that a number of states continue to be involved in the funding of this ideology internationally.

The coalition government's 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy did note the significance of foreign funding and the need to disrupt this financing, noting that "the flow of people, ideology, and money is increasingly international", and stating that "the extremism we see here is often shaped by and connected to extremism elsewhere in the world, including the movement of individuals, ideology, and funding."³ However the issue has not been addressed as part of a detailed or comprehensive programme of legislation. Neither the Extremism Bill proposed in the Queen's Speech of May 2015, nor the Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill announced in the Queen's Speech of May 2016 detailed any measures for making the foreign financing of extremism a priority.⁴ While neither of these Bills were ever put before Parliament, the government did not outline any further plans for such legislation in the June 2017 Queen's Speech, and although it has pledged to establish a commission on countering extremism, there has not yet been any indication of whether the body will undertake work on Islamist extremist ideology being financially driven from overseas.

Since the 1960s, Saudi Arabia has been committed to a policy of promoting the kingdom's hardline interpretation of Wahhabi Islam globally. Over the past 30 years, Saudi Arabia has spent at least £67 billion on this endeavour.⁵ The most profound impact has been in other parts of the Islamic world, where funding from Gulf States has been used to promote a more extreme interpretation of Islam, often overriding local practices and traditions that are more moderate. As the Wikileaks cables revealed, during the first term of the Obama administration the US State Department was not only concerned about how funds from countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar were reaching the West, but also about how funding from these countries was finding its way to countries such as Pakistan for the purpose of supporting clerics preaching a particularly hardline version of Islam.⁶ India's own intelligence agencies had reported that between 2011-2013 Saudi Arabia sent \$250 million dollars, as well as thousands of clerics, to India for the purpose of

¹ Queen's Speech 2017, HM Government, 21 June 2017, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/queens-speech-2017>, last visited: 21 June 2017.

² Who Are Britain's Jihadists?, *BBC News*, 22 February 2017, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-32026985>, last visited: 21 June 2017.

³ Counter-Extremism Strategy, HM Government, October 2015

⁴ 'Counter-extremism policy: an overview', House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper Number 7238, 9 June 2017.

⁵ 'Saudis and Extremism: "Both the arsonists and the firefighters"', *The New York Times*, 25 August 2016, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-islam.html?_r=0, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁶ 'How Saudi Wahhabism Is the Fountainhead of Islamist Terrorism', *The WorldPost*, 22 March 2015, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-yousaf-butt-saudi-wahhabism-islam-terrorism_b_6501916.html, last visited: 16 April 2017.

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establishing Wahhabi mosques and seminaries.⁷ At the international level this is a phenomenon that has arguably influenced the character and tone of religious practice and belief in Sunni Muslim societies from Africa to Indonesia.

Nevertheless, the money has also been used to export Wahhabism to the West. There have been reports that since the 9/11 attacks and the rise of groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State, Gulf leaders have told Western diplomats that they now recognise the need to rein in funding that could be being used to promote Islamist extremism.⁸ In recent years several of these nations have created domestic programmes for deradicalising and rehabilitating Islamist militants, with Saudi Arabia launching a new centre for countering the ideology of groups such as Islamic State in the spring of 2017.⁹ In September 2016 the kingdom's Ministry for Islamic Affairs, Da'awah and Guidance put new rules in place to regulate when the state's Imams can preach in other countries¹⁰. Nevertheless, it has also been alleged that the amount of funding for religious extremism coming out of countries such as Saudi Arabia has actually increased in recent years. In 2007 Saudi Arabia was estimated to be spending at least \$2 billion annually on promoting Wahhabism worldwide.¹¹ By 2015 that figure was believed to have doubled.¹² The impact of this increased spending may well have been felt in Britain. In 2007, estimates put the number of mosques in Britain adhering to Salafism and Wahhabism at 68.¹³ Seven years later, the number of British mosques identified with Wahhabism had risen to 110.¹⁴

Many observers and policy makers have pointed to a double standard that exists when countries with an absence of religious freedom, such as states in the Gulf, take advantage of religious freedom in the West to promote intolerance. In 2015 the US State Department detailed Saudi Arabia as one of the worst countries in the world for religious freedom.¹⁵ Under Saudi law, anyone born to a Muslim father is legally classified as a Muslim. Should such a person seek to convert to another religion then this is punishable by death under Saudi law. Speech considered blasphemy against Islam is punishable by death – although imprisonment is more common. Saudi law also makes it illegal to publicly practice any religion other than Sunni Islam, which includes preventing proselytising by other religions or even the construction of places of worship for other faiths.

1. Foreign Influence & Funding for Islamist Extremism in the UK

Saudi Arabia operates a number of major charitable organisations responsible for channelling funding for Islamic educational activities worldwide, including in Britain. However, in practice, the form of education advanced by these institutions involves a concerted effort to promote the hardline Wahhabi interpretation of Islam endorsed by the Saudi state. Two of the largest Saudi organisations tasked with this role are the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) and the Muslim World League (MWL). WAMY has had a long record

⁷ 'How Saudi Arabia export radical Islam', *The Week*, 8 August 2015, available at: <http://theweek.com/articles/570297/how-saudi-arabia-exports-radical-islam>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁸ "We Misled You": how the Saudis are coming clean on terrorism', *Politico*, 14 September 2016, available at: <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/09/saudi-arabia-terrorism-funding-214241>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁹ 'Saudi to open militant-monitoring centre During Trump Visit', *Reuters*, 20 April 2017, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-gulf-centre-idUSKCN18G09P>, last visited: 22 June 2017.

¹⁰ "Stop the Activities of Overseas Advocates", *Mekkah*, 4 September 2016, available at: <http://makkahnewspaper.com/article/189809>, last visited 29 June 2017.

¹¹ 'Why Wahhabi/Salafist Mosques Should be Banned from Receiving Foreign Funding', *Jain Dale*, 28 June 2015, available at: <http://www.jaindale.com/posts/2015/06/28/why-wahhabi-salafist-mosques-should-be-banned-from-receiving-foreign-funding>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

¹² Choksy, C.E.B. & Choksy, J.K., 'The Saudi Connection: Wahhabism and Global Jihad', *World Affairs*, May/June 2015, available at: <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/saudi-connection-wahhabism-and-global-jihad>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

¹³ 'Wahhabism: A deadly scripture', *The Independent*, 1 November 2007, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/wahhabism-a-deadly-scripture-398516.html>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

¹⁴ Bowen, I., *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: inside British Islam* (2015).

¹⁵ 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2015', *U.S. Department of State website*, available at: <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

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of involvement with the promotion of violent Islamist extremism and the distribution of hateful literature.¹⁶ During the organisation's early years WAMY was headed by Kamal Helbawy, formerly a senior figure in the Islamist group the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁷ Equally, MWL has had officials and member organisations linked with both al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In 2008 MWL held a conference at which Yusuf al-Qaradawi—a spiritual figurehead in the Muslim Brotherhood—was provided with a platform from which to promote extremism and anti-Semitism.¹⁸

Many of those in Britain today who can be categorised as adhering to the Wahhabi ideology promoted by Saudi Arabia prefer to identify as Salafist; a much broader term that encompasses both non-violent and violent extremist positions. Indeed, some of the Salafi Jihadi preachers in the UK have been so extreme that they have aligned with groups such as al-Qaeda in voicing support for the overthrow of Muslim rulers, including the monarchy in Saudi Arabia itself. Some of Britain's most prominent Islamist extremist preachers — men such as Abu Qatada, Abu Hamza, Abdullah al Faisal, Shiekh Omar Bakri — have all sat within what can be described as a broadly Wahhabi/Salafi ideology.¹⁹ In 2014 it was estimated that Britain's Salafi Mosques had a collective capacity for a 44,994 strong membership.²⁰

Over a number of years, more moderate Muslim groups in the UK, such as Sufis, have observed a trend of their young people moving toward Salafism and in part attributed that phenomenon to the influence of Saudi funded mosques and literature. In some communities, the impact has been particularly dramatic. In a US government briefing prepared for President Barack Obama's adviser on Muslim engagement, the Highfields district of Leicester was described as being dominated by the influence of Wahhabism.²¹ This despite the fact that most of those living in that community are of South Asian, rather than Arabian origin.

An integral part of the Saudi effort to promote Wahhabism in countries like Britain has involved bringing individuals from the UK to Saudi Arabia for the purpose of undertaking religious study. As Innes Bowen recounted in her 2014 book on British Islam; “some of the most dedicated young Salafis were recruited with Saudi-funded scholarships to study at the kingdom's international university in Medina. They returned home as preachers, setting up mosques and bookshops and spreading the Salafi message in English to another generation of potential recruits”.²² The extremist preacher Shakeel Begg spent five years studying at the Islamic University of Medina and since his return to the UK there have been numerous instances of Begg engaging in extremist speech.²³ The Lewisham Islamic Centre, the mosque and community led by Begg, has also extended invitations to a number of other extremist Salafist preachers including Haitham Al-Haddad, Uthman Lateef and Murtaza Khan.²⁴ In 2009 Khan gave a talk at the mosque advocating hostility and aggression against non-Muslims.²⁵

Saudi scholarships to institutions such as the University of Medina generally include the covering of tuition fees, travel, accommodation and expenses. This kind of financial support has made studying in Saudi Arabia a far more attractive option for those looking to train in religious leadership roles. Whereas South Asian graduates of Deobandi seminaries in the UK had previously gone on to continue their studies in India or Pakistan, in recent years there has been an increase in the numbers furthering their studies in Saudi Arabia.²⁶

¹⁶ Levitt, M., 'Combating terror financing despite the Saudis', *The Washington Institute*, 1 November 2002, available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/combating-terrorist-financing-despite-the-saudis>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

¹⁷ 'The Brotherhood 'deviated' from original focus, prioritised politics over revolution', *Daily News Egypt*, 2 June 2014, available at: <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2014/06/02/brotherhood-deviated-original-focus-prioritised-politics-revolution-kamal-helbawy/>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

¹⁸ Levitt, M., 'Combating terror financing despite the Saudis', the Washington Institute, 1 November 2002.

¹⁹ Bowen, I., *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: inside British Islam* (2015).

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ 'Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB)', Courts and Tribunals Judiciary (28 October 2016), available at: <https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/shakeel-begg-v-bbc-judgment-final-20161028.pdf>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ 'Murtaza Khan and the Lewisham Islamic Centre', *Harry's Place*, 30 January 2015, available at: <http://hurryupharry.org/2015/01/30/murtaza-khan-and-the-lewisham-islamic-centre/>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

²⁶ Bowen, I., *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: inside British Islam* (2015).

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Many of these individuals are trained as preachers and it is estimated that hundreds of these British students have been through the Saudi system in recent decades. Often they have returned to work within the Urdu speaking Ahl-e-Hadith movement or the English speaking JIMAS youth movement.²⁷ In this way British preachers trained in the Wahhabi ideology were able to assist with the spreading of hardline and illiberal interpretations of the Islam to the wider British Muslim community.

In a minority of cases, institutions in the UK that receive Saudi funding are also run directly from Saudi Arabia, as is the case with WAMY and also reportedly the King Fahd Mosque in Edinburgh.²⁸ In most cases, however, the money appears to simply buy foreign donors influence. For instance, this might involve the opportunity to use a mosque as a platform from which Salafi/Wahhabi preachers can promote their ideology. As the Channel 4 Dispatches programme *Undercover Mosque* revealed, several mosques which were found to have a serious problem with extremism being promoted on their premises have also been recipients of Saudi funding.²⁹ One of the institutions that Dispatches raised concerns about was the East London Mosque, which has been a major recipient of Saudi funding and has also hosted a number of extremist Saudi speakers.³⁰ Two of the most serious were Abdul Rahman Al-Sudais and Adel Salem Al Kalbani.³¹ Al-Sudais has preached hatred against non-Muslims, particularly Jews, while Al Kalbani was refused entry to the UK on account of his preaching and incitement against Shia.³² In 2014 the East London Mosque was involved in further controversy over its affiliation with Ibrahim Hewitt, a preacher responsible for homophobic incitement.³³

The same investigative documentary programme uncovered examples of Islamist extremism at Regent's Park Mosque. That mosque has also been the recipient of funding from Saudi Arabia, and as well as being found to have been used as a venue by extremist speakers, hateful literature such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion have been found on sale in the mosque's bookshop.³⁴ However, some of the most serious incidents of Saudi backed extremism have been recorded at Birmingham's Green Lane Mosque. In particular the mosque provided a regular platform for hate preachers trained in Saudi Arabia, including Abu Usamah who has used the rhetoric of incitement against non-Muslims and glorified Jihad.³⁵ Additionally, the mosque regularly used live satellite links to broadcast sermons from hardline preachers in Saudi Arabia.³⁶ While it may not be possible to precisely quantify the impact of this kind of preaching, the liberal Imam Taj Hagey has suggested that "it is no coincidence that since Wahhabism gained a hold on British Muslims, especially on university campuses and in mosques, the threat of terror has intensified".³⁷

While it is rarely the case that a definitive or causative connection can be established between foreign funding and individuals being recruited into terrorism, in the case of the Qatari funded al-Muntada Trust, there appear to be significant links. The trust is not only financed by Qatar but in 2013 the UK branch held its annual conference in Doha.³⁸ The trust has been connected with a number of mosques where radicalisation has taken place. Specifically, in the case of a group of young British men from Cardiff, it has been suggested that attendance at the al-Muntada linked al-Manar Mosque was significant in their radicalisation and decision to travel to Syria and join the Islamic State.³⁹

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ 'Undercover Mosque', *Channel 4 Dispatches*, first broadcast January 2007.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

³³ 'Oxfam cancels event at East London Mosque over "homophobic" speaker', *East London Advertiser*, 22 January 2014, available at:

http://www.eastlondonadvertiser.co.uk/news/oxfam_cancels_event_at_east_london_mosque_over_homophobic_speaker_1_3231791, last visited: 16 April 2017.

³⁴ 'Undercover Mosque', *Channel 4 Dispatches*, first broadcast January 2007.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ 'Why does Britain turn a blind eye to these medieval zealots peddling lessons in hate?', *Daily Mail*, 23 November 2010, available at:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1332210/Why-does-Britain-turn-blind-eye-medieval-zealots-peddling-lessons-hate.html>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

³⁸ 'How our allies in Kuwait and Qatar funded Islamic State', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 2014,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/kuwait/11077537/How-our-allies-in-Kuwait-and-Qatar-funded-Islamic-State.html>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

³⁹ *ibid.*

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As well as employing the controversial Saudi trained preacher Haitham al-Haddad as an Imam, al-Muntada and its associated mosques have also held a number of events with the Saudi cleric Mohammed al-Arefe, who has been accused of radicalising Nasser Muthana and Reyaad Khan, both of whom attended the al-Manar Mosque, before subsequently joining ISIS.⁴⁰ Mohammed al-Arefe has now been banned from entering several European countries, including the UK.⁴¹ Al-Arefe, who is a member of the Saudi based Muslim World League, has a strong online and social media presence and included among his twitter followers one of the individuals arrested in the Willesden Green counter-terror raid in April 2017⁴². Among those residents arrested was Mohammed Amoudi, who in 2015 had attempted to travel to Syria with two younger sixth formers under his influence.⁴³

Another extremist figure reported as linked to the al-Muntada Trust who appears to have had a role in radicalisation was Nabil al-Awadi.⁴⁴ Head of the Kuwaiti Scholars Union, al-Awadi was for a period of time partially resident in the UK. However, in 2014 even the Kuwaiti authorities acted against his extremism, stripping al-Awadi of his Kuwaiti citizenship, reportedly in response to his involvement in fundraising for a number of Jihadist groups active in Syria.⁴⁵ Yet despite this overt level of extremism, for a period of time al-Awadi served as director of the al-Birr Islamic school in Birmingham.⁴⁶

The distribution of hardline and illiberal texts has been another way that Wahhabism has been promoted to Britain's Muslim community. In the 1990s some literature was distributed directly from the Saudi embassy in London; particularly Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab's key text *Kitab al Tawhid*.⁴⁷ This was a text that is believed to have been a key factor in the radicalisation of several of Britain's Salafist preachers at that time, including Abdur Raheem Green.⁴⁸ However, more recently there have been concerns about bookshops linked to Saudi funded mosques and educational institutions distributing extremist literature. The Islamic Foundation in Leicestershire has been recorded as receiving significant Saudi funding,⁴⁹ and there have been a number of concerns about extremist activities at that institution. This has included the distribution of literature promoting the conversion of the population of the United Kingdom to Islam and turning the country into an Islamic state.⁵⁰

There have also been ongoing concerns about how illiberal Wahhabi ideology may be reaching young people in Britain, particularly through textbooks for school children. A 2009 report by Civitas noted that there were 24 Muslim schools operating in the UK which it described as "Saudi schools"; Saudi funded and influenced schools ranging from primary to middle and secondary levels of education.⁵¹ Indeed, the same textbooks used in the Saudi national curriculum were found to be being used in some such schools in the UK. The content of these textbooks is so extreme that in 2014 Islamic State adopted these books as the official textbooks for the schools in its caliphate.⁵² In 2010, investigations by the BBC suggested that around 5000 British children in some 40 clubs and schools were being educated in the official curriculum of Saudi Arabia.⁵³ The Imam Taj Hagey commented on some of the schools that use these texts explaining; "perhaps the most disturbing

⁴⁰ *ibid*.

⁴¹ 'Britain bans Saudi cleric who supports jihad in Syria', *Reuters*, 25 June 2014, available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-islam-saudi-cleric-idUKKBN0F024R20140625>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁴² 'Banned Saudi preacher link to raided "house of terror"', *the Times*, 30 April 2017, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/banned-saudi-preacher-link-to-raided-house-of-terror-q6jfc6plbq>, last visited: 4 July 2017

⁴³ 'Student "influenced boys found in Turkey"', *the Times*, 21 March 2015, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/student-influenced-boys-found-in-turkey-b5wnrsdpcj>, last visited 4 July 2017

⁴⁴ 'How our allies in Kuwait and Qatar funded Islamic State', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 2014.

⁴⁵ *ibid*.

⁴⁶ 'Revealed: Islamic State's 'banker' was director of a private Muslim primary school in Birmingham', *Daily Mail*, 3 September 2014, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2738933/Revealed-Islamic-State-s-banker-director-private-Muslim-primary-school-Birmingham.html>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁴⁷ Bowen, I., *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: inside British Islam* (2015).

⁴⁸ *ibid*.

⁴⁹ *ibid*.

⁵⁰ *ibid*.

⁵¹ MacEoin, D., 'Music, Chess and other Sins: Segregation, Integration, and Muslim Schools in Britain', Civitas (2009), available at: <http://www.civitas.org.uk/pdf/MusicChessAndOtherSins.pdf>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁵² 'Saudis and Extremism: "Both the arsonists and the firefighters"', *The New York Times*, 25 August 2016.

⁵³ 'Saudi school lessons in UK concern government', *BBC News*, 22 November 2010, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11799713>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

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feature of the weekend schools is how they serve as a gateway to extremist theology and political radicalism. This ultimately paves the way to domestic terrorism”.⁵⁴

While much of the focus has been on foreign funded Islamist extremism within Sunni Islam, it is important to note that there has been some Iranian funding of institutions within Britain's Shia community, this time promoting Khomeinist rather than Wahhabi doctrine. One of the most significant institutions in this regard is the Islamic College of Advanced Studies in Willesden, London. The college reportedly receives the majority of its funding directly from the Islamic Republic of Iran and as such differs from many British Shia institutions in that it does closely identify with the Iranian regime and its ideology.⁵⁵

An institution that is in many respects even more overtly aligned with Tehran is the Islamic Centre of England, based in Maida Vale. The head of that organisation, Ayatollah Abdolhossein Moezi, who is the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's primary religious representative to Britain, is on record promoting anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.⁵⁶ In addition to these links to the Iranian regime, there have been other concerns about extremism at the Islamic Centre of England. Previously, complaints have been made about the centre's publication *Living Islam*, which has promoted the conspiracy that Zionists were behind the Anders Breivik massacre.⁵⁷ Indeed, the magazine's editor, Amir de Martino, was formerly a member of the Italian neo-fascist scene, prior to his conversion to Islam.⁵⁸

The Islamic Centre of England has also worked in partnership with the Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission to bring the extremist American preacher Shaykh Hamza Sodagar to the UK on speaking tours in October 2014 and October 2016. Sodagar has made various hateful statements and is accused of having promoted anti-Semitic conspiracy theories,⁵⁹ as well as being on record in a 2010 address as having outlined various ways in which to execute homosexuals.⁶⁰ One of the venues billed for hosting Sodagar on his 2016 visit was the Islamic Republic of Iran School in London, which is understood to be operated by the Iranian government.⁶¹ Sodagar's visit was arranged by the Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission based in London, but which is part of the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly, which is headed by the Iranian cleric Mohammad Hassan Akhtari, who was formerly the Iranian ambassador to Syria, and a key figure in the founding of the terrorist group Hezbollah.⁶²

2. The International Response to the Challenge

Over the past decade, Western governments have increasingly sought to find ways to counter the foreign funding of the promotion of Islamist extremism among their publics. In 2007 the Australian government became one of the first to act on this issue when it intervened to reject a Saudi request to transfer funds to the Islamic Society of South Australia. This move was specifically taken amidst concerns about foreign funded Islamist extremism.⁶³ The Norwegian government similarly acted in 2010 to reject Saudi funding for the construction of a mosque in Oslo, with the Norwegian Foreign Minister citing Saudi Arabia's lack of religious

⁵⁴ 'Why does Britain turn a blind eye to these medieval zealots peddling lessons in hate?', *Daily Mail*, 23 November 2010.

⁵⁵ Bowen, I., *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: inside British Islam* (2015).

⁵⁶ 'The Islamic Centre of England's ex-fascist on Anders Breivik: "blame Zionists"', *Community Security Trust website*, 27 June 2012, available at: <https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2012/06/27/the-islamic-centre-of-englands-ex-fascist-on-anders-breivik-blame-zionists>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ 'Our Responsibilities toward Palestine', *Hamza Sodagar, Shia TV*, 2 August 2013, available at: http://www.shiatv.net/view_video.php?viewkey=1250032609, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁶⁰ 'US Muslim preacher 'who advocated beheading of gay men allowed to lecture in the UK'', *The Independent*, 6 October 2016, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/hamza-sodagar-us-muslim-preacher-who-advocated-beheading-of-gay-men-allowed-to-lecture-in-the-uk-a7348886.html>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁶¹ 'Islamic hate preacher who called for gay men to be beheaded is teaching children as young as six at a school in London', *Daily Mail*, 6 October 2016, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3825696/Islamic-hate-preacher-called-gay-men-beheaded-teaching-children-young-six-school-London.html>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁶² Rubin, M., 'The Enduring Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Axis', *American Enterprise Institute*, 17 December 2009, available at: <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-enduring-iran-syria-hezbollah-axis/>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁶³ 'Canberra Vetoes Mosque', *The Australian*, 9 January 2007, available at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/canberra-vetoes-mosque/news-story/15d441688c9ab52056c2fbaae41b1ef5>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

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freedom.⁶⁴ Indeed, the issue of Saudi Arabia's own lack of religious freedom and freedom of expression has often been highlighted amidst wider concerns about the impact of Saudi funded activities in otherwise democratic and pluralistic societies. As Taj Hagey has argued; "There is a huge element of hypocrisy about the propagation of Wahhabism in Britain, as hardline Muslim regimes are utterly intolerant of any other faith. It is impossible to build a Christian church in Saudi Arabia, yet the same ideologues constantly demand the right to build mosques in Britain. They want the privileges here that they refuse to accord other faiths when they are in control".⁶⁵

More recently, in February 2015 Austria reformed its pre-existing laws on Islam to prohibit the foreign funding of mosques and imams.⁶⁶ The Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz said at the time that the reforms were a "milestone" for Austria and aimed to stop some Muslim countries using financial means to exert "political influence".⁶⁷ He went on to explain, "what we want is to reduce the political influence and control from abroad and we want to give Islam the chance to develop freely within our society and in line with our common European values".⁶⁸ The terrorism expert Thomas Hegghammer reiterated this argument more starkly when he stated "if there was going to be an Islamic reformation in the 20th century, the Saudis probably prevented it by pumping out literalism".⁶⁹

Several other countries also now have ongoing efforts to meet the policy challenge of foreign funded Islamist extremism. In December 2015 Sigmar Gabriel, Germany's Vice Chancellor, explicitly called for an end to Saudi Arabia's funding of "Wahhabi mosques" in Germany and worldwide.⁷⁰ The German government has not announced any measures to enforce this call. However, previously German governments have taken some limited action to disrupt Saudi funded extremism, such as in 2003 when German authorities seized 300 extremist textbooks from the King Fahad Academy in Bonn.⁷¹

More recently, in December 2016 a leaked report from Germany's intelligence agencies indicated that extremist Salafist groups in Germany have received funding from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait as part of a "long-running strategy to exert influence".⁷² The report noted that the funding was being channelled to a range of institutions and individuals, including extremist preachers, schools, Mosques and *dawah* — or missionary — groups. The report is also said to have specifically named a number of the organisations providing the funding, including the Sheikh Eid Bin Mohammad al-Thani Charitable Association, the Muslim World League, and the Kuwaiti Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, a group outlawed in several countries on account of its extremism, including the United States.⁷³

It was further noted by the German intelligence agencies that those Gulf-based organisations responsible for funding Islamist extremism in Germany, are closely linked to the governments of the Gulf nations from which they originate.⁷⁴ Despite this, as of yet the German government has not set out any explicit plans to prevent the funding finding its way to extremists in Germany. In France, however, in July 2016, following a wave of Islamist attacks in Europe, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls said that France was considering

⁶⁴ 'No Saudi money for American mosques', *The Hill*, 22 August 2016, available at: <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/292188-no-saudi-money-for-american-mosques>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁶⁵ 'Why does Britain turn a blind eye to these medieval zealots peddling lessons in hate?', *Daily Mail*, 23 November 2010.

⁶⁶ 'Austria passes controversial reforms to 1912 Islam law', *BBC News*, 25 February 2015, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-31629543>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ 'Saudis and Extremism: "Both the arsonists and the firefighters"', *The New York Times*, 25 August 2016.

⁷⁰ 'German vice-chancellor accuses Saudi Arabia of funding Islamic extremism in the West', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 December 2015, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/12035838/German-vice-chancellor-accuses-Saudi-Arabia-of-funding-Islamic-extremism-in-the-West.html>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁷¹ MacEoin, D., 'Music, Chess and other Sins: Segregation, Integration, and Muslim Schools in Britain', *Civitas* (2009).

⁷² 'Saudi Arabia and Gulf states "support Islamic extremism in Germany," intelligence report finds', *The Independent*, 14 December 2016, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/saudi-arabia-gulf-states-fund-islamic-extremism-germany-salafism-wahhabism-qatar-kuwait-islamists-a7473551.html>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

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implementing a temporary ban on the foreign financing of mosques as part of a range of measures to counter Islamic extremism in France.⁷⁵

In the United States there have been some limited efforts to prevent the promotion of Islamist extremism at foreign funded educational institutions. In 2007, Congress called on the Secretary of State to address concerns about Saudi funded extremism in the US, highlighting the Islamic Saudi Academy in Virginia as a particularly problematic institution.⁷⁶ Subsequently, the congressional Commission on International Religious Freedom called for the closure of that institution and in 2008 further concerns were raised about extremist texts being taught at the Islamic Saudi Academy.⁷⁷

In July 2016, there were more comprehensive moves in the United States to address the problem of foreign funding being used to promote Islamist extremism. As such American congressman David Brat proposed the Religious Freedom International Reciprocity Enhancement Bill which called for a ban on US religious institutions receiving funding from individuals in states that do not themselves protect religious liberty.⁷⁸ Once again, this move focused on the question of whether it should continue to be the case that states which permit no religious freedom at home are themselves free to advance religious extremism and intolerance in Western democracies.

Britain, however, has seen far less of a response from policy makers supporting moves to tackle the challenge of foreign funded Islamist extremism. However, in January 2016, David Cameron did acknowledge that there is a problem of Saudi funded education programmes in the UK that may be responsible for promoting Islamist extremism.⁷⁹ That same month, with growing concerns on this matter, Downing Street tasked the Home Office's Extremism Analysis Unit with investigating the subject of foreign funded extremism in the UK.⁸⁰ At the time it was reported that the Unit was to brief the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary on the findings by the spring of that year.⁸¹ While initial reports in May 2017 suggested that the investigation had not yet been completed⁸², Downing Street subsequently confirmed that it had in fact received the report in 2016⁸³. Nevertheless, the government has said that the report may not be published, with the Home Office also stating that the content of the report is "very sensitive".⁸⁴

Conclusion & Policy Options

Over the past decade or more, a growing body of evidence has emerged that points to the considerable impact that foreign funding has had on advancing Islamist extremism in Britain and other Western countries. The attempt by several states to influence Islamic communities and advance an illiberal – and at times anti-Western – version of the Islamic religion appears to have been an intentional and systematic policy, with the level of funding allocated to this effort believed to have grown in recent years. While some of this financing appears to originate from private individuals and independent foundations, research by the German

⁷⁵ 'French PM considers ban on foreign-funded mosques', *The Guardian*, 29 July 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/29/french-pm-manuel-valls-considers-ban-on-foreign-funded-mosques>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁷⁶ MacEoin, D., 'Music, Chess and other Sins: Segregation, Integration, and Muslim Schools in Britain', Civitas (2009).

⁷⁷ *ibid*.

⁷⁸ 'Rep. Brat introduces 2 Homeland Security anti-terrorism bills', *Press Releases, Dave Brat*, 19 July 2016, <http://brat.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=235>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁷⁹ 'Cameron admits Saudi Arabia funds extremist schools – so why are they still our allies?', *The Express*, 18 January 2016, available at: <http://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/635774/David-Cameron-worries-Saudi-Arabia-funding-schools-extremism>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁸⁰ 'Inquiry into foreign backers of UK extremists gets green light', *The Guardian*, 17 January 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jan/17/inquiry-foreign-backers-uk-extremists>, last visited: 16 April 2017.

⁸¹ *ibid*.

⁸² "Sensitive" UK terror funding inquiry may never be published', *The Guardian*, 31 May 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/may/31/sensitive-uk-terror-funding-inquiry-findings-may-never-be-published-saudi-arabia>, last visited: 23 June 2017.

⁸³ 'Theresa May sitting on report on foreign funded extremism', *The Guardian*, 3 July 2017, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/03/theresa-may-report-foreign-funding-extremists-saudi-arabia?CMP=share_btn_tw, last visited: 4 July 2017.

⁸⁴ "Sensitive" UK terror funding inquiry may never be published', *The Guardian*, 31 May 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/may/31/sensitive-uk-terror-funding-inquiry-findings-may-never-be-published-saudi-arabia>, last visited: 23 June 2017.

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intelligence agencies and others has pointed to these foundations being closely linked to governments of several Gulf States.

Indications of the kind of influence that such funding can have on recipient institutions in the UK can be seen through the prevalence of Islamist extremist preachers and literature, including the use of Saudi school textbooks. This combined with scholarship programmes that bring clerics to Saudi Arabia for training, has gradually contributed to changing the climate of religious belief and practice in many of the West's Muslim communities. As well as promoting hardline Wahhabi practices to Muslim communities that formerly identified with other Islamic traditions, this phenomenon has created a challenge for moderate voices and empowered extremists. Creating a framework that benefits the promotion of non-violent extremist ideologies can also ultimately assist those seeking to recruit for violent Islamist extremism.

What is publicly known about the foreign funding of Islamist extremist activities in the UK almost certainly does not represent the full extent of what has happened in recent years. So far, it has not been possible to ascertain a comprehensive picture of this phenomenon. Some institutions linked with Islamist extremism may publicly announce or promote the fact they have been awarded funding from foundations or individuals that happen to be based overseas. However, there is no obligation to declare such funding and so any survey of this area will necessarily be incomplete. With a still incomplete picture of the full scale and nature of foreign funded of extremism, Western governments are attempting to grapple with forming policies that can effectively meet this challenge.

Given that there is a clear lack of information and understanding about this subject, both among policy makers and the public, the government should start to address this issue by launching an official and public inquiry into the subject. The new commission for countering extremism announced in the Queen's Speech of June 2017 could make addressing the financing of Islamist extremism from overseas a matter of priority. The government has previously acknowledged the relevance of funding from abroad in its 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy, and pledged to look at this issue further. Nevertheless, it remains unclear what the government intends to do practically to address and counter the influence of foreign funding responsible for driving Islamist extremism in Britain. Unless policy makers have the relevant and necessary information on foreign funding, it will prove difficult to shape adequate policy solutions or legislation for effectively addressing this challenge.

The lack of extensive data available on foreign funding and Islamist extremism in the UK further highlights the need for greater openness and transparency. This may ultimately be judged an area that requires legislation. Lawmakers might consider introducing legislation specifically aimed at creating more transparency in this area by setting down parameters under which groups receiving financing from abroad would be obliged to publicly declare such funding. Specifically, this might involve identifying those countries with a serious record of funding Islamist extremism and requiring that charities or religious groups receiving funding from those states — or foundations based in those states — declare this funding. As well as obliging such groups to disclose the amount of funding or who provided the donations in question, there might also be a case for requiring that recipients declare how the funding is being used and additionally any conditions placed on the receipt of funding should be made public.

As part of the effort to create policies to address foreign funded Islamist extremism, it might be suggested that the government should consider measures that would block certain funding altogether, either to specific recipients or funding from donors in particular states. Such measures might conceivably incorporate elements of the Religious Freedom International Reciprocity Enhancement Bill proposed in the United States. Nevertheless, in the UK such legislation would likely encounter a number of obstacles and objections. Initially, such a policy could potentially provoke controversy over complaints of excessive state intervention in religious institutions. Additionally, there would be difficult decisions about which states should be categorized in this way, and whether such a law would only block funding from governments of certain

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countries, or whether the legislation would also target funding from independent organisations and private individuals in those states. As with any new legislation, there could also be concerns about unintended and undesirable consequences; such as the blocking of funding meant for legitimate and constructive purposes.

This is not to say that there are never instances where the government should intervene directly to prevent foreign funding in this area. In very serious cases, such as those relating to terrorism, this is already a matter that should be being addressed under existing regulations for disrupting terror financing, such as the 2010 Terrorism Asset-Freezing Act. However, seeking to expose and ultimately disrupt funding for nonviolent Islamist extremism is a matter that could be most effectively approached as part of the government's pre-existing strategy on extremism. While that strategy already acknowledges the relevance of this issue, the government is yet to definitively outline how it will be effectively addressed.

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The Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism (CRT) is unique in addressing violent and non-violent extremism. By coupling high-quality, in-depth research with targeted and impactful policy recommendations, we aim to combat the threat of Islamism in our society.



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